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A CRITICAL MASS

Creating Comprehensive Services for
Dual Language Learners in Harrisonburg

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Series Introduction for the District Profiles

The demographics of schools in the United States have been changing rapidly for some years now. One of the most telling changes in the last decade has been the increase in ethnic and linguistic diversity in communities that have not historically had large numbers of recent immigrants. None of the five counties with the fastest growth in Hispanic residents (from 2000 to 2011) are in areas with traditionally high numbers of immigrants: Luzerne County (PA), Sevier County (TN), Frederick County (VA), Paulding County (GA), and Henry County (GA).¹ While the percentage of dual language learners (DLLs) enrolled in American schools grew by 18 percent from the 2000–01 school year to the 2010–11 school year, it grew by 610 percent in South Carolina, 306 percent in Kentucky, 255 percent in Nevada, and 230 percent in Delaware. The DLL population in Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia, and North Carolina more than doubled over the same period.²

Educators and policymakers in these states—and many others—are grappling with this shift in a variety of ways. Few of them have statewide experience supporting the linguistic and academic growth of linguistically diverse students. Some are

exploring ways to use investments in high-quality pre-K to support students who speak a language other than English at home. Others are wondering how they can prepare and support teachers working with these students. Still others are considering ways to support DLL families through wraparound services and community investments. Most are trying to find ways to serve these students without segregating them from the rigor of mainstream academic instruction.

Fortunately, communities wrestling with new linguistic diversity in their schools do not have to invent their own best practices from scratch. There are districts across the country—earlier frontiers of integration—with a longer history of supporting dual language learners in their schools. The challenge, then, is to share institutional expertise and wisdom from the districts with experience serving these students well with those who are experiencing new linguistic diversity. This is the fourth in a series of district profiles by New America's Dual Language Learners National Work Group seeking to capture this knowledge and make it accessible for educators and policymakers across the country.

How New America Defines "Dual Language Learners" (DLLs)

A dual language learner (DLL) is a child between the ages of zero and eight years old who is in the process of learning English in addition to his or her home language(s). These students may or may not be enrolled in schools where instruction is conducted in both languages.

The profiles in this series use DLL to refer to these students for two reasons: 1) our research is focused on students in the PreK–3rd grades, where this term is generally the most accurate; and 2) to avoid confusion caused by labeling children based on various words associated with specific interventions or strategies (such as "dual immersion") rather than on their language status.

INTRODUCTION

The vibrant, green hills outside of Harrisonburg, Virginia are dotted with pastures and small farms. This rolling land in the fertile Shenandoah Valley serves as a reminder of the region's history as the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy.” During the Civil War, the Confederate army relied on the area’s diverse and rich agricultural production as a source of food, which made the area a prime target for attack. As historians from the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation write, “throughout the war, the lines between the homefront and warfront blurred as battles raged in farmers’ fields, filling churches and homes with wounded. When the curtain closed on this horrific conflict, much of the region lay devastated, its population decimated.”³

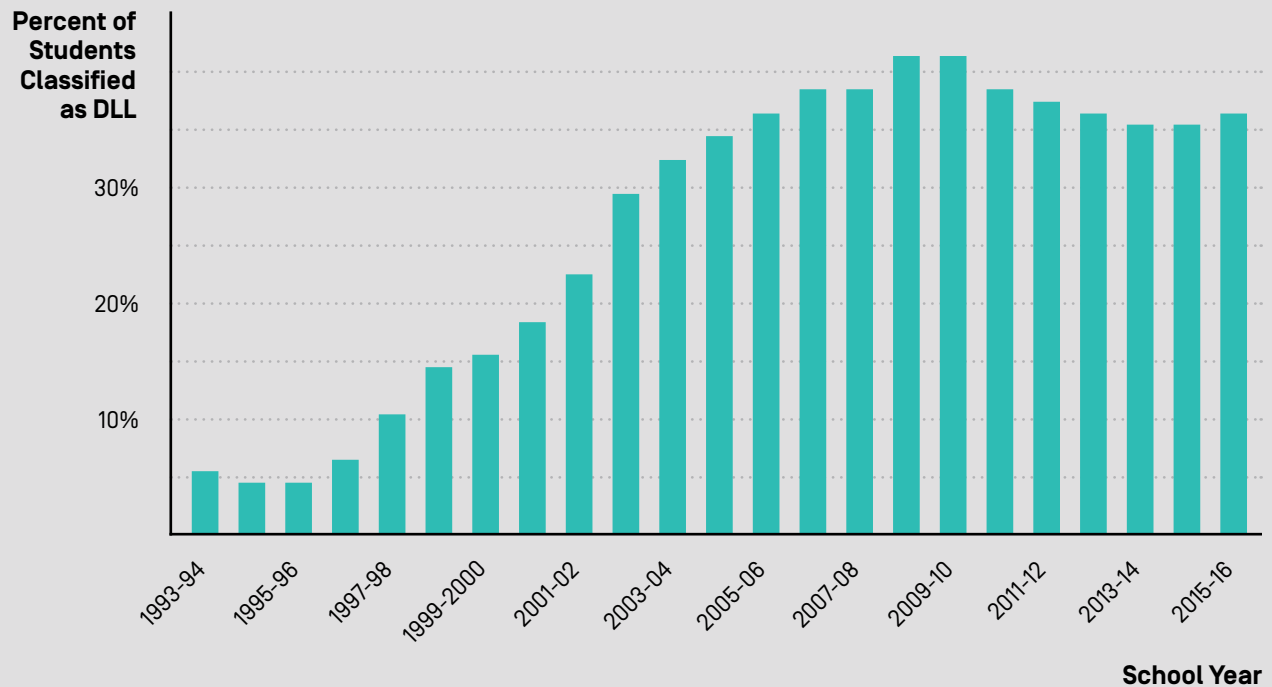
Gradually, the valley reestablished its agricultural dominance. During the 1920s, the region became known for its poultry industry, which led to its eventual designation as the “Turkey Capital of the World.”⁴ The strength of the area’s poultry and farming industries has attracted an influx of Central American immigrants in recent years. By 2015, Latinos represented nearly 20 percent of the town’s 52,000 residents.⁵ In addition, the federal government has been sending refugees to Harrisonburg since the 1970s, starting with refugees from the Vietnam War. In 1988, Harrisonburg became home to a refugee resettlement center, increasingly serving arrivals from Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Public school enrollment numbers reflect this influx of newcomers: the number of dual language learners (DLLs) in grades K–12 has grown from 10 percent to a high of 41 percent in the past two decades, with 51 home languages and 46 different countries represented (see **Figures 1, 2, and 3**). In 2015, Harrisonburg City Public Schools enrolled just under 6,000 students across its five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Forty-five percent of students were Latino and 34 percent were DLLs. In the 2013–14 school year, Latinos became the majority student population in Harrisonburg (see **Figures 4 and 5**).



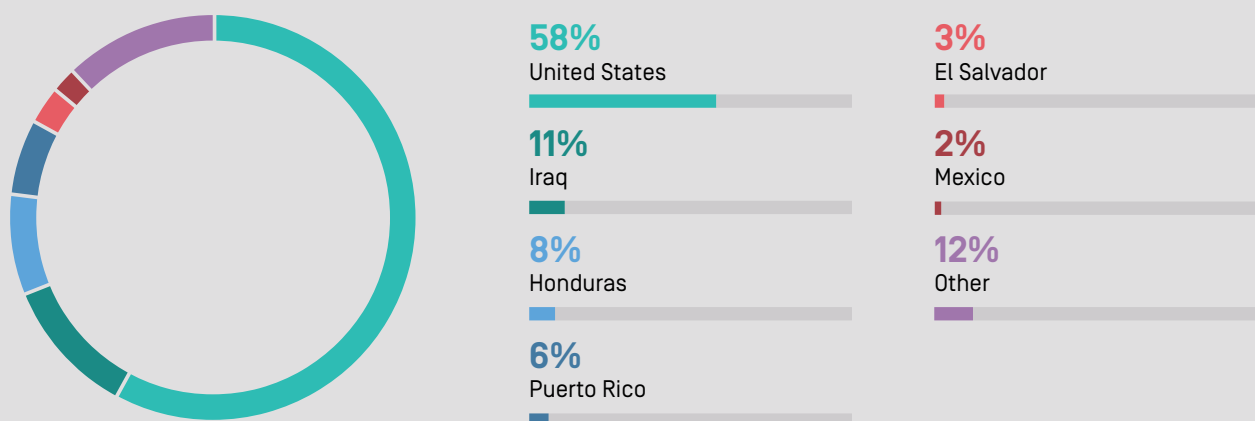
Harrisonburg's poultry and farming industries have attracted an influx of Central American immigrants in recent years. Photo: Janie T. Carnock

Figure 1 | DLL Enrollment Trends (1999–2015)



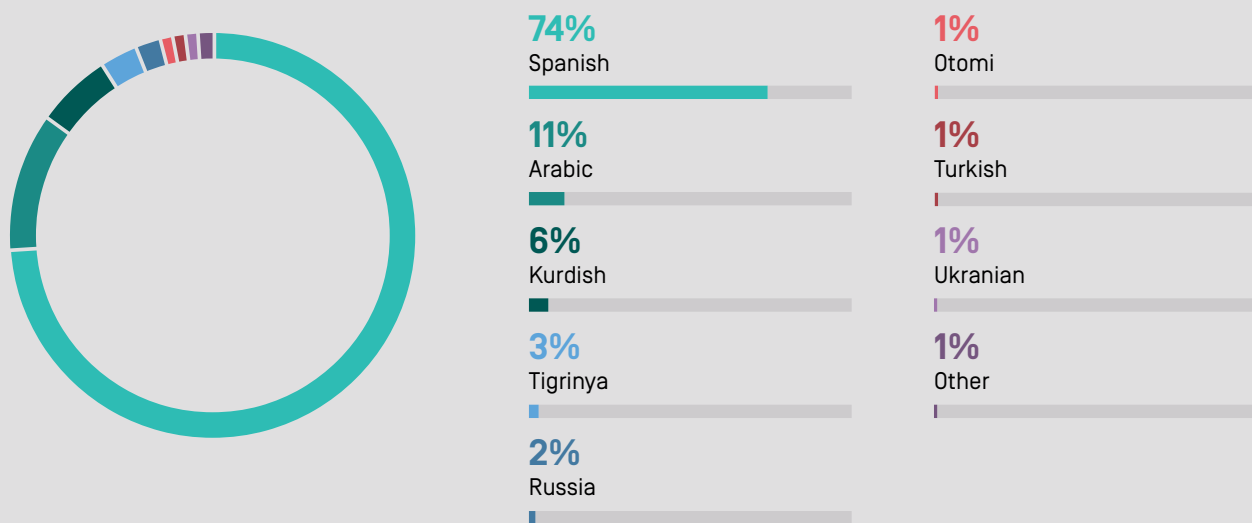
Source: Harrisonburg City Public Schools: LEP Student Enrollment Summaries, <http://harrisonburg.k12.va.us/Instruction/English-as-a-Second-Language/Enrollment-Statistics>.

Figure 2 | Top Countries of Birth



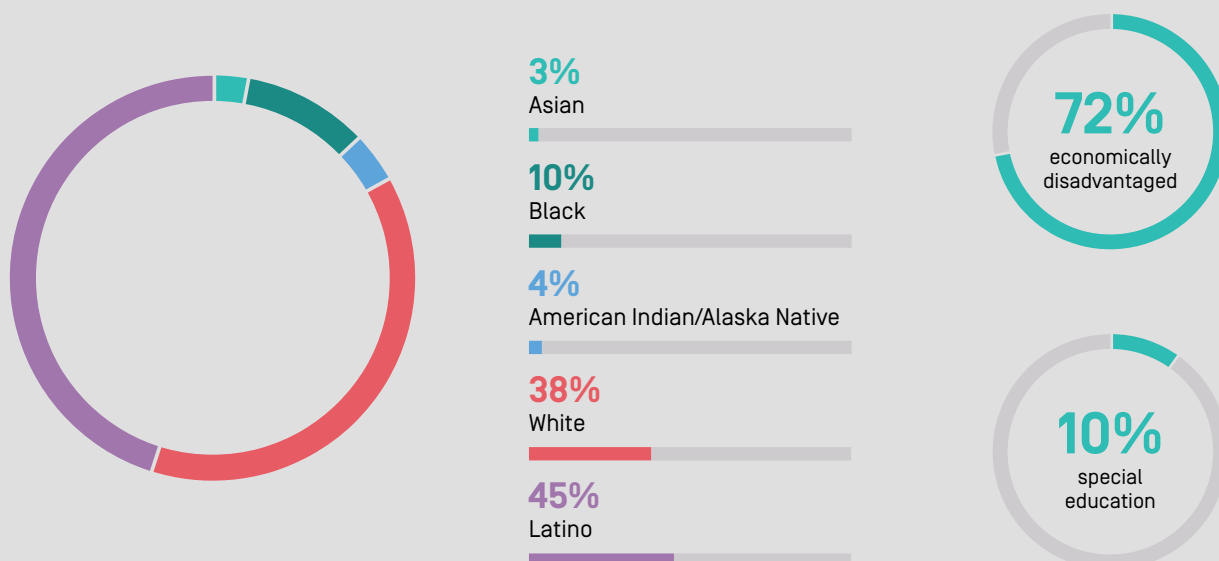
Source: Harrisonburg City Public Schools: LEP Student Enrollment 1/29/2016, <http://harrisonburg.k12.va.us/Instruction/English-as-a-Second-Language/Enrollment-Statistics/2015-2016/1-29-16-Birth-Countries-and-Languages>.

Figure 3 | Top Languages Spoken



Source: Harrisonburg City Public Schools: LEP Student Enrollment 1/29/2016, <http://harrisonburg.k12.va.us/Instruction/English-as-a-Second-Language/Enrollment-Statistics/2015-2016/1-29-16-Birth-Countries-and-Languages>.

Figure 4 | Student Demographics, SY 2015–16



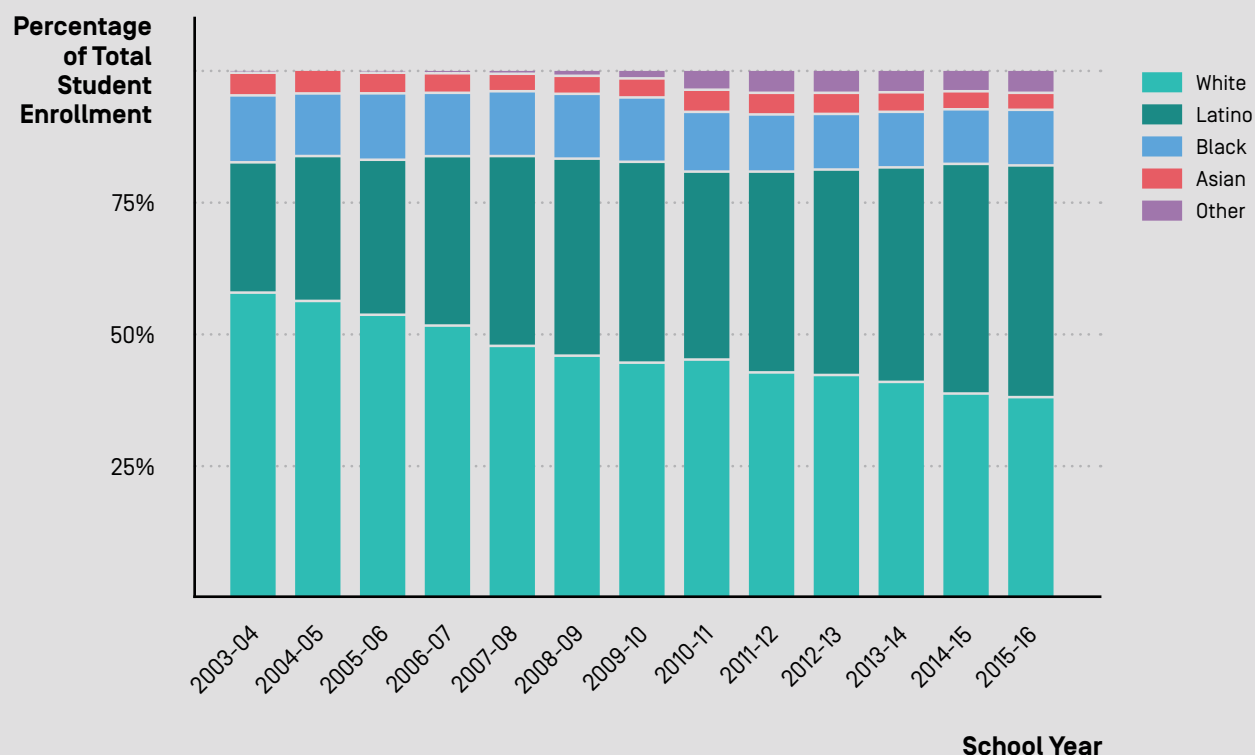
Source: Author's calculations based on data obtained from Virginia Department of Education, Fall Membership Data, 2015-16, http://bi.vita.virginia.gov/doe_bi/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Main&subRptName=Fallmembership.

The city has largely welcomed these changes; many residents recognize the value that diversity brings to the community. The city’s cultural and ethnic diversification has happened alongside economic growth. “Folks see that the growth in diversity has been very healthy for us,” said Harrisonburg City School Board member Dany Fleming⁶ (see sidebar: *Why Harrisonburg is Unique*).

Harrisonburg City Public Schools has become one of the leaders in the state for its approach to DLL

education, an advantage due, in part, to the district’s substantial experience with this population. The city’s significant increase in DLLs led to a “critical mass” of students who required specialized approaches to promote their English language development and academic achievement. “I think for us it’s the years that we have had a population—a critical mass—that has led us to be paying attention to it for longer. We have been doing it for longer and had to come up with our [own] solutions,” HCPS ESL Coordinator Laura Feichtinger McGrath told us.¹¹

Figure 5 | Enrollment Trends by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Author’s calculations based on data obtained from Virginia Department of Education, Fall Membership Data, 2003-04 through 2015-16, http://bi.vita.virginia.gov/doe_bi/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Main&subRptName=Fallmembership.

Our paper examines how Harrisonburg’s public schools have adapted to these changes and the myriad instructional programs, familial supports, and services they have implemented to better serve DLLs and their families. We visited four elementary schools in Harrisonburg and spoke with over 30 school district leaders, staff members, teachers, and community

members to learn more about the city’s creative approach to supporting DLLs’ educational needs.

We describe five key pillars of Harrisonburg’s systemic approach to educating DLLs in order to provide guidance for other districts that have growing numbers of linguistically diverse students.

Why Harrisonburg is Unique

Residents of Harrisonburg, Virginia characterize the town as a “welcoming community” that “embraces diversity” and as a place with a “very unique and powerful story” to tell.⁷ It’s a story of a changing community that accepts diversity rather than rejecting it. Why would this be the case when many other communities have approached similar changes with fear or prejudice?

There is no one clear answer to this question. Harrisonburg has several characteristics that imbue the community with an uncommon energy and ethos around immigrants, refugees, and dual language learners. First, Harrisonburg is a college town, home to James Madison University and Eastern Mennonite University, which brings the progressive energy that generally comes with higher education. Second, the city has a small, but significant, Mennonite community with a tradition of cultural reconciliation and welcoming newcomers. Third, the members of the community we interviewed said they view diversity as a strength and as something that has been beneficial to the city’s economic development and growth.

Finally, Harrisonburg City Public Schools has been responsive to the needs of its diverse student population thanks to leaders who share a common vision. HCPS Superintendent Scott Kizner, who has been leading the district since 2010, is known for valuing diversity and taking time to reflect on what he and his staff are doing. “We’re doing X-rays of ourselves,” Kizner said. “We’re going through our own MRI.” For example, he said, his staff is noticing that not all of the district’s specialized programs are accessible because they do not reflect the full diversity of the students.⁸

This district is run by central office staff members who began their careers as teachers in Harrisonburg and have stayed with the district through the course of these changes. At the heart of these efforts is Laura Feichtinger McGrath, who has worked in the district since 1998 and has been leading its DLL work for the past five years. Peers at the central office describe Feichtinger McGrath as “the moral center of it all,” as “instrumental” to the district’s work, and as a “great advocate for our [DLL] population.”⁹

These leaders have helped foster a culture of reflection on the instructional practices, social-emotional support, and programs offered to all students. This mindset has elevated the needs of DLLs into the mainstream and shifted the perception that they are solely the responsibility of specialized teachers and staff. Helping these students “has to be everybody’s job,” said Feichtinger McGrath. “Everybody needs to know what best practices are.”¹⁰

First, the district has expanded its pre-kindergarten programs to serve nearly 60 percent of four-year-olds in the city, including a large share of DLLs.

Second, a Welcome Center, bilingual home-school liaisons, parent engagement programs, and family support groups provide comprehensive family engagement programs to help families of DLLs. **Third**, the district has a variety of services for newcomer students who are recent arrivals to the U.S. and have low levels of English language proficiency. **Fourth**, teachers in the district are offered a range of professional development opportunities to help them work effectively with DLLs. **Finally**, HCPS has implemented Spanish-English dual immersion programs in the majority of its elementary schools and recently developed a district-wide program model (see below for more information on common instructional methods).

The district's multifaceted approach to DLL education has produced encouraging results. Data from the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) given to pre-K and kindergarten students show substantial gains in early literacy skills. By the end of pre-K, the majority of students meet benchmarks in alphabet recognition, name writing, letter sounds, and other early literacy indicators. It is early days for gauging the long-term academic impact of the district's dual immersion programs since the majority of students have not yet reached middle school, when the academic impact of these programs is often observed.¹² However, the program is already having a positive impact on DLL reclassification. Specifically, DLL students in dual immersion program are shedding the DLL label by the end of fourth grade, which is not the case for DLLs enrolled in English-based instructional programs.

Instructional Models for Supporting DLLs¹³

- **Dual Immersion:** These programs take a number of forms, but generally consist of a mixed class of DLLs and native English speakers receiving instruction in two languages. Some models begin with a 90 percent to 10 percent ratio of classroom instruction conducted in the home language to English, and shift towards a 50/50 balance over a period of years. Other dual-immersion programs begin at 50/50.
- **Maintenance or Developmental Bilingual:** These programs generally consist of a class of DLLs receiving instruction in both the home language and English, with an eye towards developing proficiency in both languages.
- **Transitional Bilingual:** These programs generally consist of a class of DLLs receiving instruction in both the home language and English with the goal of moving them into mainstream English instruction as quickly as possible.
- **English as a Second Language:** These programs usually provide instruction in English structured in such a way as to support English acquisition. This model provides periodic, targeted instructional support from a specially trained educator. Push-in services usually occur in the student's main classroom. Pull-out services usually involve instruction outside the main classroom during the school day. Sheltered instruction, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), integrates ESL strategies with content learning.

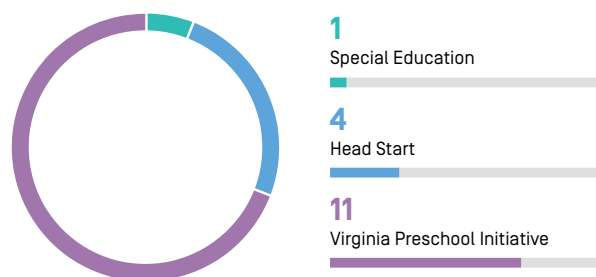
SCALING UP EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Harrisonburg City Public Schools has been offering public pre-K for over 20 years. The first Head Start classrooms opened in 1994, followed in 1997 by one additional pre-K classroom funded through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) (see sidebar: *Virginia Preschool Initiative*). In 2006, the district initiated major VPI expansions, adding four classrooms, with an additional five classrooms in 2011. By 2016, public pre-K was offered in 16 classrooms across three HCPS elementary schools. The majority of pre-K classrooms are funded by either VPI or Head Start (see **Figure 6**). As a result of eligibility and targeting requirements, these classrooms serve primarily low-income children. Fully 96 percent of participating children are eligible for federal lunch subsidies and 57 percent speak a language other than English at home (see **Figure 7**).¹⁵ Together, these programs serve nearly 60 percent of the city's four-year-olds.¹⁶ By comparison, only 18 percent of four-year-olds overall in Virginia are enrolled in state pre-K.¹⁷

The city's expansion of early childhood education programs is largely due to the leadership of Superintendent Scott Kizner, who has set out to give Harrisonburg a seamless PreK–12 system.²⁸ Kizner does not just want to expand pre-K; he also wants to link it with the K–12 system. The number of pre-K classrooms has doubled since

he joined HCPS in 2010. “The building that we’re sitting in right now, I assure you they built the ground and the foundation before they built the roof,” Kizner told us.²⁹ He further elaborated that many children in the community stand to benefit from participating in pre-K as an educational “foundation” that gets students ready for kindergarten learning and beyond.

Figure 6 | Preschool Classrooms by Program Type



Source: Sharon Shuttle, HCPS Early Learning Services Coordinator.

Those benefits are especially tangible for DLLs, who represent over half of all children enrolled in HCPS pre-K programs, a number that is noteworthy for several reasons. First, data on enrollment nationally

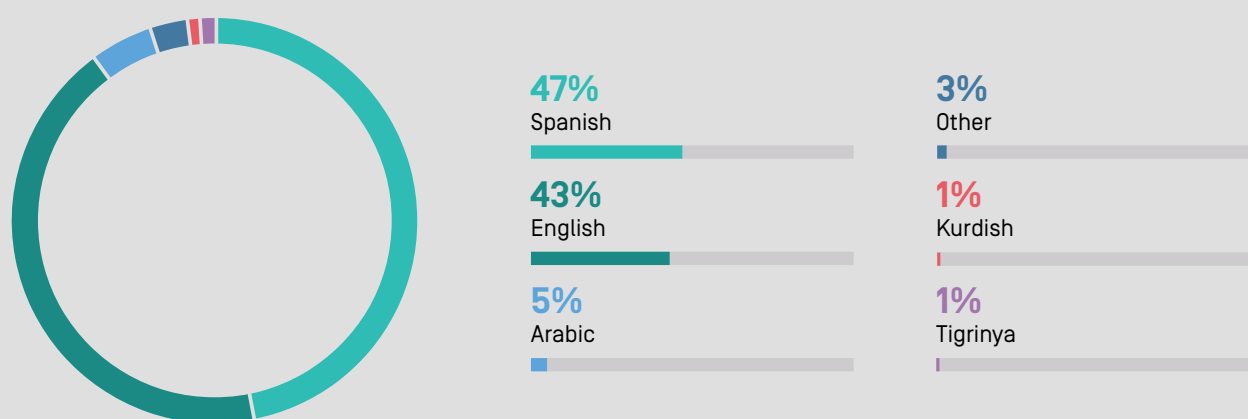
show that DLLs often participate in high-quality early education programs at lower rates than their non-DLL peers.³⁰ In Harrisonburg, multilingualism is used as a screening criteria for determining eligibility for pre-K programs, which likely helps increase access for DLLs.

Second, the relatively high number of DLLs enrolled demonstrates the impact and reach of the district’s family engagement programs. The HCPS Welcome Center serves as a one-stop hub for pre-K enrollment. The staff is multilingual (Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, and Russian) and “has been integral for increasing access to pre-K,” said Anita Warner, VPI home-school liaison.³¹ In her role, Warner provides Spanish language support, answers questions, and helps share information about pre-K programs. “In many cities, access for DLLs is a problem,” Warner said, “but that is not a problem in Harrisonburg.”

Finally, research from programs around the country indicates that DLL participation in high-quality early childhood education programs supports significant early literacy, math, and language development. Researchers Howard Bloom and Christina Weiland found that DLLs enrolled in Head Start made larger gains in their receptive vocabulary and early numeracy skills than non-DLLs.³² Other studies have shown that Head Start helped DLLs make gains in their English language development.³³ Participation in pre-kindergarten programs is also beneficial to children of immigrants and has been found to enhance their school readiness and English proficiency.³⁴ Research also suggests that DLLs who reach English-language proficiency in kindergarten keep pace academically with their non-DLL peers as they progress through school.³⁵

Overall, HCPS pre-K programs are showing the strong student outcomes these studies would predict. Data from the PALS screening show

Figure 7 | Primary Language Spoken by Students in HCPS Pre-K



Source: Sharon Shuttle, HCPS Early Learning Services Coordinator.

Virginia Preschool Initiative

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) has provided high-quality early education for over 20 years.¹⁸ VPI was enacted by the state legislature in 1995 and expanded in 2005 to provide pre-K for “at-risk” four-year-olds not served by Head Start. The program is funded by state lottery revenues and local matching funds (contributions are based on a composite index of local ability to pay). In 2015, the state spent approximately \$68 million on the program—\$3,742 per child—and served 18,250 children (18 percent of all four-year-olds).¹⁹ Together with local contributions, the total amount of per-pupil funding in 2015 was \$5,887.²⁰

The state uses four criteria to determine whether a child is “at-risk” and therefore eligible for the program: 1) family income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line; 2) homelessness; 3) parents or guardians are school dropouts; and 4) family income is less than 350 percent of the federal poverty line in the case of students with special needs or disabilities.²¹ Localities also have discretion to determine additional eligibility criteria, including whether the child is in foster care, has an incarcerated parent, or is a dual language learner.

VPI guidelines mandate that programs be either half-day (at least 3 hours) or full-day (at least 5.5 hours) for the duration of the school year.²² Programs must include five services: 1) quality preschool education; 2) parental involvement; 3) comprehensive child health services; 4) comprehensive social services; and 5) transportation. The guidelines require that children be assessed in the fall and spring of each school year using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-PreK) and that program curricula align with the state’s early learning standards (Virginia’s Foundation Blocks for Early Learning).

Teachers are required to be certified in early childhood education and have a bachelor’s degree.

A 2013 evaluation of VPI found that children across the state who attended the program had “improved literacy outcomes and reduced likelihood of grade retention.”²³ The impact of the program was largest for Hispanic students: 90 percent of those who attended VPI met PALS benchmarks when they entered kindergarten in the fall, compared to only 50 percent of children who did not attend the program. These gains persisted through the end of first grade. Despite the program’s effectiveness, participation in VPI has been constrained by several factors, including limited local funding and classroom space in participating school districts.²⁴

In recent years, Virginia has attempted to find ways to address these challenges and increase access to VPI. First, it implemented a pilot in 2007 to test the viability of creating additional program slots in child-care centers, faith-based programs, university or military centers, and family care providers. A 2008 evaluation of the pilot found gains in participating children’s early literacy and numeracy skills. On the strength of these findings, the state concluded that a mixed-delivery service model was feasible—and desirable.²⁵ Second, Virginia was awarded a federal *Preschool Development Grant* in 2014 and used the funds to launch VPI+ and open additional preschool slots in 11 high-need communities across the state.²⁶ Finally, the state launched the *Mixed Delivery Preschool Fund and Grant* program in April to provide funds for localities to pilot “innovative strategies and evidence-based practices” to develop mixed-delivery preschool systems that include public and private providers with the aim of helping increase preschool access.²⁷

significant gains in early literacy skills between the fall and spring. For example, only 28 percent of incoming pre-K students performed at benchmark levels on alphabet recognition, but by the spring 91 percent of these children met the benchmark. Similar levels of growth are evident across multiple measures on PALS: letter sounds (10 to 87 percent), print and word awareness (16 to 86 percent), and name writing (40 to 98 percent). Comparisons between incoming kindergarteners who did and did not attend pre-K show large differences in early literacy skills. Consider: 85 percent of Harrisonburg children who attended pre-K met benchmarks across *all* of the measures on the kindergarten PALS, compared to only 61 percent of children who did not attend pre-K.

Yet, strong PALS scores are only part of the equation. According to Sharon Shuttle, early learning services coordinator for the district, 64 percent of pre-K students in HCPS are later sentence users in English, which means these students are not using five or more words in a sentence most of the time. To Shuttle, that is a signal that their language skills need strengthening. “Having high PALS scores, but not having strong language skills leaves things incomplete,” Shuttle said.³⁶

To that end, the district’s early education programs are shifting towards a stronger focus on oral language development. Oral language development is a predictor of DLLs’ later literacy and academic language skills.³⁷ According to a 2014 meta-analysis of language and literacy development, several studies have found that a child’s oral language skills in her first language actually predict her early literacy skills and letter and word recognition in English in kindergarten and first grade.³⁸

In addition, the district is elevating the importance of play in the early years. For example, assessment practices have been modified to observe skills in play-based learning activities rather than pulling children aside for “testing,” and teachers are offered professional development focused on play-based learning. Research broadly suggests that

peers can support language acquisition through play and other activities that require children to “engage in joint planning, negotiate conflicts, provide explanations [and] tell stories.”³⁹ A 2013 study by California State University’s Ruth A. Piker suggests that mixed language play groups (e.g., with English *and* Spanish speakers) set up “optimal circumstances”⁴⁰ for DLLs to practice English and strengthen their skills in English.⁴¹

Moving forward, HCPS aims to increase access and to continue strengthening its pre-K programs. The district’s data reveal that a full 25 percent of incoming kindergarteners have not had any type of pre-K experience. Space constraints are hampering the district’s ability to offer more slots. In recent years, HCPS has experienced a surge in student enrollment and many elementary school buildings are overcrowded. While the city qualifies for 434 state-funded VPI slots, only 208 children will actually be served in the next school year due to a lack of space in school buildings.⁴²

The district has developed strategies to increase pre-K access. It has partnered with James Madison University to open up additional VPI seats in the early childhood program on campus. HCPS was also recently awarded a joint grant with JMU as part of the state’s new *Mixed Delivery and Preschool Fund and Grant* program, which will allow it to offer 40 additional VPI slots at private childcare centers and to provide teachers with professional development geared towards working with DLLs.⁴³

Under Kizner’s leadership, HCPS was able to secure funding from the city council to build a stand-alone early childhood center. “That’s a commitment not only from me but also the school board and the entire community,” said Kizner.⁴⁴ The Elon Rhodes Early Learning Center will open in 2017 with eight VPI classrooms and one special education classroom.⁴⁵

Additionally, the district is considering how to better align pre-K with the rest of the early elementary education system (see sidebar: *Pre-K to 3rd Grade Alignment*). Currently, the district’s

literacy supervisor looks at pre-K PALS data to get a sense of how student performance matches up to kindergarten expectations. But according to Shuttle, alignment is minimal. Part of the challenge lies in the district's organizational chart. Historically, pre-K was grouped under "Special Programs" and it was only in the 2015–16 school year that it became part of the elementary education division. Moreover, pre-K classrooms are located in only three of the district's five elementary schools, which means teachers of different grade levels have to travel between schools to meet.

Shuttle sees the value of stronger alignment, especially for supporting DLL language and literacy development via bilingual education. Currently, the

district's dual immersion programs, with instruction in both English and Spanish, do not start until kindergarten due to the challenge of finding qualified teachers. All VPI and Head Start teachers in the district are already required to be certified in special education and early childhood education; adding the requirement that they be bilingual would make finding teachers all the more difficult. The trickle-down effect of these hiring challenges means DLLs have to switch from an English-dominant environment in pre-K to a bilingual environment in kindergarten dual immersion classes. Shuttle would like to include more home language supports in pre-K "to help get [DLLs] get ready for bilingual instruction."⁴⁶

Pre-K to 3rd Grade Alignment

New America's report, *Beyond Subprime Learning: Accelerating Progress in Early Education*, lays out a comprehensive vision that would help "ensure a seamless continuum of high-quality, easily accessible early education for all families from pre-K through third grade."⁴⁷ The proposals include essentials such as access to full-day pre-K for three- and four-year-olds and full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds, targeted to prioritize low-income families. Other critical elements include:

- A smooth transition from infant-and-toddler programs into pre-K into kindergarten and into each grade thereafter.
- Clearly sequenced, developmentally appropriate, and well-rounded curricula and assessments in pre-K, kindergarten, first, second, and third grade.
- Collaboration between principals and directors of pre-K programs to develop a transition plan that makes sense for families.
- School leadership that recognizes the importance of pre-K and the early grades, with principals supporting joint planning and professional development.
- Data-driven instruction to help PreK–3rd teachers determine where children are and collaborate on how to best meet the needs of all students.
- Family engagement that welcomes families into the classroom and fosters positive home learning experiences.

A MULTI-TIERED APPROACH TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Along with high-quality early childhood education, family engagement is widely considered an essential component of DLL education and support. Multiple studies and reviews confirm the important role family plays in improving educational outcomes.⁴⁸ Consider: a 2012 study by Claudia Galindo and Steven Sheldon suggests that schools' communication and family engagement practices were related to students' achievement gains.⁴⁹ They used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort to examine whether school outreach to families was associated with family involvement, achievement gains in kindergarten, and whether family involvement helped mediate these outcomes. Galindo and Sheldon found that children whose parents were more involved at school had higher gains in reading and math at the end of the year, and school outreach efforts translated into higher gains in math and reading scores.

These findings are important to consider in the context of school districts like HCPS that have substantial linguistic and cultural diversity. Given the influence of family engagement on children's learning and achievement, it is essential to develop strategies to support *all* families in navigating the school system, communicating with teachers, and participating in their children's education. To

that end, Harrisonburg has implemented multiple engagement strategies tailored to meet families' diverse needs.

Welcome Center

Housed in a room at Stone Spring Elementary School, the Harrisonburg City Public Schools Welcome Center opened in 2003 as a central location for school enrollment of DLLs. At first, only students in grades 1 through 12 could register, but it eventually expanded to include pre-K and kindergarten. The walls that surround the entrance feature a colorful mural, and a sunny, yellow sign just outside the door reads "Welcome Center" in five different languages. RaMona Stahl leads the center. Her staff, which speaks Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, and Russian, endeavors to meet the needs of all families and provide support in the school enrollment process, which can be a cumbersome task, given all of the paperwork that needs to be completed and verified. For example, all pre-K through fifth grade students require a complete physical to enroll in school. That can be difficult for families who lack health insurance and/or the money to pay out-of-pocket costs. So, Stahl and her colleagues steer them to a local doctor who charges \$50 per child, the "cheapest in town."⁵⁰

All language screenings are conducted at the center. Staff members conduct initial assessments of students' skills in their home languages and they use different language screeners based on the children's ages. For example, five-year-olds are screened using the IDEA Proficiency Test and first through fourth grade students are screened using the WIDA Access Placement Test (W-APT). Parents are given the results of the assessments and they discuss the different language instruction models available with staff in order to ensure that each child is placed appropriately.

on someone from the refugee resettlement center to provide interpretation.

The growing needs of the immigrant and refugee population have put some strain on the Welcome Center, since most staff members only work part time. Stahl said she wished there were three full-time staff members at all times to connect families to all of the services they require, especially housing. "It's not getting easier," she said. "Our population is increasingly stressed economically. And demands continue to ratchet up in terms of what kids need."⁵²

Home-School Liaisons

Harrisonburg's home-school liaisons serve as the primary touch point between parents who do not speak English and the school. They are responsible for: 1) promoting family involvement by facilitating the school orientation process; 2) providing communication supports such as phone calls and home visits; 3) providing supports to students by collaborating with school counselors, including referrals to necessary social services and help with college and career discussions; 4) facilitating student integration into the school community (e.g., extracurricular activities); and 5) supplying translation and interpretation services at parent-teacher conferences, in discussions on student discipline and truancy issues, and on school forms.⁵³

Opened in 2003, the Welcome Center serves as a central location for school enrollment and language screenings of DLLs. Photo: Janie T. Carnock, Amaya Garcia

The Welcome Center enables Stahl and her colleagues to keep an eye on the district's changing demographics and trends within the language learner population. For example, she noted that many of the high school students currently enrolling at the Welcome Center have had interruptions to their education: "Lots of students go through sixth grade and come here and are 15 and haven't been in school since they were 11 or 12," she said.⁵¹ Center staff also work closely with staff at the refugee resettlement center, who will often give advance knowledge of who is coming to enroll, when they are arriving, and what language they speak. When we visited, a family from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had just registered, and the center relied

Donita Rhodes is one of the district's 10 home-school liaisons. She grew up in Argentina and is a fluent Spanish speaker. "When I moved here," she said, "I thought, 'I'm never going to use my Spanish.'"⁵⁴ But at Spotswood Elementary, where she has been working for the past eight years, she uses it nearly every day. All HCPS home-school liaisons are bilingual (in English and Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, or Russian) and earn a teacher-level salary. Rhodes sees her role as communicating with parents to help them get involved and feel comfortable in the school community. "I am excited to see people from all over the world bringing their culture to the city," she said.⁵⁵



HCPS schools rely on home-school liaisons to help build connections between school and home and ensure DLLs and their families receive necessary information and services. As such, the strength of relationships between these liaisons and families is critical.

Given the influence of family engagement on children's learning and achievement, it is essential to develop strategies to support all families in navigating the school system, communicating with teachers, and participating in their children's education.

When Principal Anne Lintner and her team were recruiting families for their new dual immersion program at Keister Elementary, they turned to home-school liaison Sonny Rodriguez. He has been at Keister for 11 years and knows many of the Latino families in the area. "Sonny was a big part of helping some of the Latino families understand that value of the program. Some of their initial concern was that ... their kids weren't going to learn to speak English," Lintner said. "Even though you could say, 'the research doesn't support that, the research supports exactly the opposite,' they still didn't believe it. It didn't make sense to them. So when Sonny said it, well, they know he's telling them the truth."⁵⁶ Lintner appreciates the way that her school has been able to engage families in the program and gives Rodriguez much of the credit for the trusting relationship he has developed with families.

Beyond serving as a bridge for instruction and academics, liaisons take a holistic approach to serving students and families, coordinating with community partners to provide wraparound services. For example, Rhodes has partnered with school nurse Sarah Coleman to organize multilingual women's health forums. They have

also hosted separate health fairs for parents and children and tried offering a Zumba class to help provide basic health maintenance and exercise opportunities for families. Rhodes has also worked with the public library to bring its bus into Latino neighborhoods, created a clothes closet where parents can donate and pick up clothes, helped families find doctors, shared her personal cell phone number so parents can call her at any time, and collaborated with a church to bring in food donations for students to take home on the weekends. "They come here and we help them problem-solve. We want to be a strong support," Rhodes told us.⁵⁷

Parents as Educational Partners Program

Harrisonburg also works to engage families of DLLs through the Parents as Educational Partners (PEP) program, a state initiative designed to provide parents with limited English skills with necessary information on the American school system, strategies for getting involved in the school, and adult ESL courses.⁵⁸ The state offers annual training on the "Parents as Educational Partners (PEP): School-Related Curriculum for Language Minority Parents" curriculum (developed by the Adult Learning Resource Center in Illinois) as part of its efforts to comply with parental participation requirements under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act.⁵⁹

At Spotswood Elementary School, the PEP program provides parents access to a wide range of information. English classes are offered twice a week in the fall and spring using Rosetta Stone software. People from the community are also invited in to talk about issues of common concern, such as health and parenting. Home-school liaison Donita Rhodes distributed a survey to find out what parents wanted to learn about, and tried to tailor program offerings to match parents' interests. To help maximize attendance, childcare is offered at every class. Rhodes and her colleagues have also tried to tailor PEP classes to specific language groups. They have had groups for Arabic-speaking

parents, and also Amharic- and Tigrinya-speaking women. Mothers reported that the groups made them feel more comfortable coming to the school. Parents who participate in PEP are also encouraged to attend Community Advisory Meetings to increase their involvement in larger school issues.

The school started a Spanish Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) because Spanish-speaking parents did not feel comfortable participating in the existing PTO at Spotswood.⁶⁰ The group met for a year and helped parents learn that they had a right to advocate for their children and to have a voice in what happened at the school. The initiative had mixed results but was able to increase trust and buy-in from Spanish-speaking families, according to former assistant principal Sal Romero.

Family Reunification Support Groups

While many DLLs in Harrisonburg are native-born U.S. citizens, others were born abroad and immigrated to the district. Many students, particularly the district's older language learners, come to Harrisonburg to be reunited with one or both of their parents. Virginia was one of six states that received the largest numbers of unaccompanied minors who arrived in unprecedented numbers between 2013 and 2015.⁶¹ The process of reunification can cause tension in and disruption to existing family structures.⁶² Children can feel ambivalence about being reunified with parents who they may perceive as strangers, and face difficulty adjusting to new family members.⁶³ In their 2002 study of

child, parent, and teacher perspectives of family reunification, Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie quote one parent as saying, “we’re getting used to each other. We are both beginning a different life together...[T]he kids are jealous of each other and my husband is jealous of them.”⁶⁴

According to Laura Feichtinger McGrath, the district had so many students who were in reunification situations that it made sense to offer support. To that end, federal Title III funds were used to create family reunification support groups. “We’re seeing in a lot of the blended families that...the child who is reunifying isn’t being welcomed into the family in a way that’s productive for the child...they’re dealing with their sense of abandonment and then they get here after, for some of them, a tumultuous journey and then they don’t feel like they’re being embraced,” she said.⁶⁵

HCPS ran four session groups with children, siblings, and parents to talk about what is working and not working. The groups provided a venue for parents to talk about their experiences. Feichtinger McGrath worked with other staff, including guidance counselors, to devise strategies for providing families with multiple levels of support. But she emphasized that there needs to be a balance between support and intrusion into a family’s life. “Family and school are still separate,” Feichtinger McGrath said, “and parents and families are still the ones...who know their children the best.”⁶⁶

SERVICES FOR NEWCOMER STUDENTS

In the 2015–16 school year, HCPS served 123 newcomer students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The district defines newcomers as students who have recently arrived in the U.S. (within the past year) and who earn a score of 1.0 on the WIDA Access Placement Test (indicating zero to little English language). These children are a mix of refugees from countries including Iraq, Eritrea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as new arrivals from Puerto Rico, Honduras, and El Salvador. Last year, fully 10 percent of DLLs in HCPS were new to the American school system. One third of those students were in elementary school.⁶⁷

The city's immigrant and refugee resettlement office, Church World Services (CWS) Harrisonburg, first opened in 1988 and resettles about 175 to 200 refugees a year.⁶⁸ Over time the city has welcomed people from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burma, Colombia, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Sudan, and Ukraine. When Feichtinger McGrath began working in the district in 1998, there were about 24 Kurdish and Russian refugees. Now the majority of refugees are arriving from Iraq, although there are also large groups of Eritreans, Cubans, and Central Americans. The city attracts refugees and immigrants alike, due to the availability of housing, a low cost of living, and work in local manufacturing, hospitality, and

poultry industries. This combination has helped spread the word that the city is “a decent place to live,” Feichtinger McGrath said.⁶⁹

Rebecca Sprague, Community Program Coordinator for CWS Harrisonburg, says the school system works to support refugees and their families after their first 90 days in the country, when the refugee agencies are no longer providing assistance. “Our office sees the need to do more and we want to do more,” Sprague told us. “That’s where relationships with the schools come in. Home-school liaisons can help families when the refugee office no longer can.”⁷⁰

The district employs multiple strategies to support and educate newcomers, many of which align with key areas identified in the U.S. Department of Education’s Newcomer Toolkit for welcoming students into the community, such as: gaining knowledge about students, including their prior schooling and life experiences; program structures to support learning; and community integration.⁷¹

Knowledge About Students

The refugee and immigrant student population is not a static group; students enter school at varying times in the year. As a result, knowledge about

students' prior schooling and life experiences is essential to providing the right mix of services. At Spotswood Elementary, for example, native language literacy is assessed in order to get a better picture of baseline skills. Last year, HCPS received an unexpected influx of students from Puerto Rico, many of whom had IEPs. Teachers and administrators had to try and determine why so many students had IEPs and design appropriate services.⁷² Native language assessments helped educators figure out what to do.

Growth in HCPS' refugee population has also motivated some district staff to push for professional development and resources on trauma-informed care. "We know that we have these students, but what do we do? How do we respond?" asked April Howard, Executive Director of Psychological and Student Services at HCPS.⁷³ The district has provided school counselors with training on how to work with refugee and immigrant children for several years. Recently, the district held a training session to help provide teachers, administrators, and school staff with information on working with students who have experienced trauma. The district is now working with a consultant to plan how to implement trauma-informed practices in schools.

Just before the start of the 2016–17 school year, an increase in Congolese families shifted HCPS's refugee population again. These families speak several different languages, and many of the children have spent their whole lives in refugee camps, Feichtinger McGrath said.

Program Structures to Support Student Learning

Newcomers have unique linguistic and academic needs and are often best supported in programs designed to help them learn beginning English, access content, and integrate into the public school system.⁷⁴ Harrisonburg's newcomer programs are structured to acclimate all students and to help accelerate their English language acquisition by providing the basic vocabulary

needed to navigate the school day (to go to the bathroom, find their rooms, get lunch in the cafeteria, identify food, etc.).

The district has offered elementary newcomer programs for the past 10 years. These programs are divided by grade level (K–2, 3–5) and provide students with small group instruction outside of general education classrooms. The K–2 programs provide students 60 minutes of English language development each day, usually through targeted instruction delivered by an ESL teacher. "Those program placements are dynamic, with the goal of helping kids acquire the English language skills they need to participate meaningfully in classrooms," Feichtinger McGrath said.⁷⁵

For the past nine years, newcomer students in grades 3–5 were all bused to Smithland Elementary School for an opt-in all day sheltered English immersion program. However, in the 2015–16 school year, all newcomer students were educated in their neighborhood schools and received 60–90 minutes of pull-out English language development each day, linked to math and language arts. The move was driven by the district's growing enrollment and resulting lack of classroom space. However, prior to the switch, some teachers had expressed concerns that their newcomer students did not leave the program prepared to be in mainstream classes. From Feichtinger McGrath's perspective, the change provided an opportunity to reflect on the program and see whether integrating these students into their neighborhood schools from the beginning would alleviate teachers' concerns.

She also acknowledged that educating newcomers in a separate program has benefits and drawbacks. In other settings, these programs have generated criticism for segregating newcomer DLLs from their native-English speaking peers.⁷⁶ But proponents of these programs argue that the different native languages, literacy skills, and educational backgrounds of newcomers make it challenging for them to be educated exclusively in mainstream classrooms.⁷⁷ "We see our newcomer program as a way to acclimate with intention to accelerate," she

said. “When you arrive in Nepal, you just don’t start hiking Everest.”⁷⁸

A Closer Look at Newcomer Instruction

One chilly day in January, with a forecast calling for a historic blizzard with snowfall totals of 30 inches or more, ESL teacher Marcella Rodger leads an interactive read-aloud of *Curious George in the Snow*. A group of five newcomer students listen from the carpet in her classroom at Stone Spring Elementary School, sitting with crossed legs and big eyes. By definition, most of these students have limited prior exposure to English and are recent arrivals to the country. She points at George, who is sitting at the top of a hill ready to sled, and asks, “What do you think he’s thinking?” A student responds with, “I think he’s thinking ‘Aaaaah!’”

Throughout the reading, Rodgers stops to check for student comprehension, relate George’s experiences to those of the students, and importantly, define new and unfamiliar words. These best practices for helping students access new content are more critical in this lesson than usual: the students in her class are from countries as diverse as Puerto Rico, Iraq, and Nepal, and many have never seen snow.

We see our newcomer program as a way to acclimate with intention to accelerate. When you arrive in Nepal, you just don’t start hiking Everest.

— Laura Feichtinger McGrath,
HCPS ESL Coordinator

Rodgers leads students in the use of physical gestures to reinforce word meaning: a sharply-angled arm to clarify “steep,” bending bodies for “he took a bow!,” and raised, waving fists for “they cheered for him!” She explicitly links advanced vocabulary to more basic terms (“‘Lodge’ is just like a house”) and pre-teaches key vocabulary using a poster of labeled pictures, one that she revisits as she reads to help clarify distinctions between similar terms, like “skiing” and “sledding.” As new scenarios and concepts arise in the story, she creates opportunities for students to make connections to background experiences (“Have you ever eaten a pizza with your family like George is?”) and poses higher-level questioning that supports critical thinking beyond basic recall of facts (“Is that a good idea for George to get another sled? Why or why not?”). Students have frequent opportunities to practice spoken language in teacher and peer interactions.

Inevitably, there are moments when students, grappling with the new, foreign sounds and words, get stuck. When this happens, Rodgers redirects students with a variety of scaffolds and resources (like peers or visual aids). For example, in one moment, Rodgers asks a student who very recently arrived in the U.S., “What do you think is going to happen next?” The student scrunches his face, unable to find the words for an answer. So, she reframes the question to reduce the linguistic load: “Do you think he is going to crash?” she says, smacking her hands together as she emphasizes the last word. The student responds, “Yes.” Developmentally, DLLs often develop “receptive” language before “productive.” That is, they can understand when someone speaks to them at a



The students in Mrs. Rodger’s class come from many different countries. Photo: Amaya Garcia

A Primer on SIOP

by Sammi Wong

Sheltered instruction is an approach to teaching dual language learners (DLLs) that provides access to mainstream, grade-level content while simultaneously promoting English language proficiency. The term “sheltered” relates to the practice of educating DLLs in classrooms separate from their mainstream peers, a meaning that has evolved to reflect the practice of integrating language and content-area instruction.⁸⁰

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), created in the early 1990s by Jana Echevarria, MaryEllen Vogt, and Deborah J. Short, is a method of planning, delivering, and measuring high-quality instruction to DLLs. SIOP originated as an observation tool that could be used to assess whether teachers were using sheltered strategies in their lessons, but has evolved into a comprehensive instructional model.

The method contains eight components.⁸¹ Some components, such as lesson preparation and building background, focus on the framing of the lesson and its objectives. Other components, such as comprehensible input, strategies, and interactions, highlight teacher behavior (delivery of lesson, speed of speech) and student thought processes (think-alouds, group work, or student elaboration on topic). Lastly, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment ensure that teachers are reflective and intentional about extending language and promoting student engagement.

The process begins with lesson preparation. The SIOP model emphasizes explicit communication of lesson objectives and expectations for student outcomes, both academically and linguistically. In their book, *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, Echevarria, Vogt,

and Short say, “the bottom line for DLLs is that content objectives need to be written in terms of what students will learn or do; they should be stated simply, orally, and in writing, and tied to specific grade-level content standards.”⁸²

Moreover, under SIOP, teachers model learning strategies and scaffold experiences for DLLs. These techniques are at the heart of the model. Teachers may use think-alouds, ask for elaboration, employ small group instruction, or provide finished student products for references. Teachers create multiple and varied ways of accessing content, such as visuals, graphic organizers, word walls, and games. As students and teachers interact during the lesson, teachers can promote oral English proficiency by asking questions, building in extra “thinking time” to wait for student responses, and restating student answers in correct grammatical formats. The SIOP model also emphasizes activating background knowledge of students to help them to make meaning out of lessons.

Furthermore, the model prioritizes oral language proficiency, which research has indicated is closely connected to reading and writing proficiency.⁸³ With that in mind, the SIOP model “emphasizes the importance of balancing linguistic turn-taking between the teacher and students, and among students. It also highlights the practice of encouraging students to elaborate their responses rather than accepting yes/no and one-word answers, even from the youngest learners.”⁸⁴

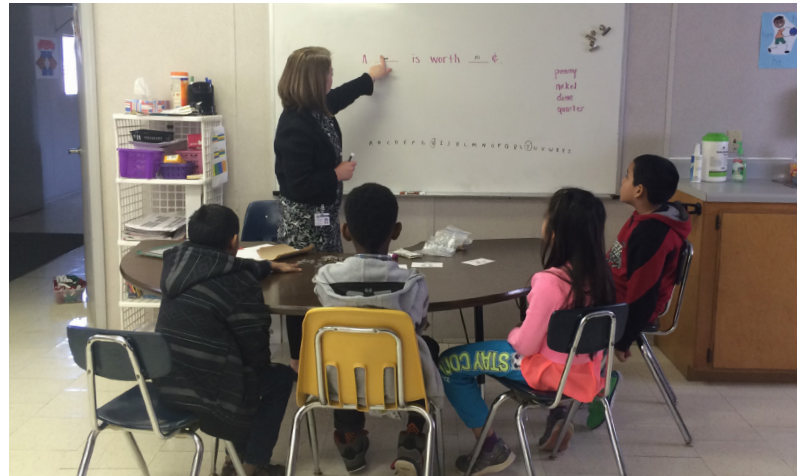
While individual components of SIOP are key aspects of effective teaching for all students generally, the benefit of the model for DLLs is the intentional inclusion and accountability of all eight components in a sheltered instructional environment.

higher level than they can produce language. “Can you say, ‘Yes, he is going to crash?’” “Yes, he is going to crash,” the student replies.

Many of the strategies that Rodgers employs in her lesson draw from the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), which is a research-based approach used to provide DLLs with language and grade-level content instruction. It includes explicit vocabulary instruction, visual representations, think-alouds, wait time for student answers, slow rate of speech, sentence frames, and intentional connections to students’ backgrounds⁷⁹ (see sidebar: *A Primer on SIOP*). Every teacher in Harrisonburg gets the chance to take a free course on SIOP to better prepare to work with DLLs. Rodgers, who was a mainstream teacher before earning her ESL certification from JMU, said learning the SIOP strategies was the most useful professional development she has ever received.

In our observations of other newcomer classes, several features of the program stood out, including high levels of student engagement, frequent opportunities for students to speak, use of SIOP strategies, support of native language, and low student-teacher ratios. Newcomer students speak very diverse languages including Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, Tigrinya, Amharic, Urdu, French, and Nepali.

In one of the newcomer math classes we observed at Keister Elementary, a group of twelve students rotated between three teachers and a computer station. Students were grouped with peers who had similar math abilities and were working on skills such as fractions, multiplication tables, and adding and subtracting with money. The classroom was alive with discussion and conversation. Many students were speaking in English with one another and their teacher as they went through the lesson. A few others spoke in Spanish—usually to ask clarifying questions—and received responses in English. All of the students were consistently engaged in their work and actively participating. In other words, students were able to practice their English language skills, gain exposure to content, and use their home languages as needed in a



Students in a newcomer math class work in small groups to add and subtract with money. Photo: Janie T. Carnock

small and comfortable setting, a key advantage of receiving instruction outside of the general education classroom. Keister’s Principal Anne Lintner said, “I see the newcomer program just as good instruction. It’s what we should have. We have to have flexibility to work with kids and figure out what they need and provide it.”⁸⁵

In a class of third and fourth grade newcomers at Spotswood Elementary, the teacher used photos of animals to help students learn descriptive language and vocabulary. She employed many visual signals and clues, paired vocabulary words with actions, used music to reinforce concepts, and encouraged students to speak in full sentences. Non-verbal cues were also used to show understanding (for example, students were asked to put their thumbs up when they liked something) and to encourage use of specific vocabulary (pointing to the temple when saying “I think,” for example). These types of strategies are common in SIOP and used to help ensure content is comprehensible to language learners. From the perspective of former Assistant Principal Sal Romero, the students in these classes “feel successful because they can access the language.”⁸⁶

The newcomer program is designed to be short-term—it is rare for a student to be in the program

for more than a year—and is also voluntary. The district recently revised exit criteria to better reflect the program goals of facilitating English language development and the institutional and cultural understanding students need to meaningfully participate in school. For elementary school students, these criteria include being able to communicate basic needs, follow along with content lessons, and use basic decoding and numeracy skills. Once they leave the program, students continue to receive language and literacy services through the HCPS English as a Second Language program. These services include push-in from ESL teachers to provide differentiated and small group instruction in the mainstream classroom.

Community Integration

HCPS has made a concentrated effort to hire staff members and teachers who reflect the diversity of its student body. Sprague explained that some schools have hired refugees to work as instructional aides or in school cafeterias, since it's “helpful” for newcomers “to have someone from their community in the school.”⁸⁷ In one newcomer class



Schools in Harrisonburg make an effort to honor and celebrate newcomers' cultural backgrounds as a valued part of the community. Photo: Janie T. Carnock

at Keister Elementary, the instructional assistant is a refugee who had been a math teacher in Iraq. Even though she has an endorsement to teach in Virginia, she is spending time as an instructional assistant to help build her English skills and knowledge of U.S. culture.⁸⁸

Schools also make an effort to honor and celebrate newcomers' cultural backgrounds as a valued part of the community. For example, a recent multicultural celebration at Stone Spring Elementary included a potluck where families brought in traditional food and visual displays as presentations about their home countries. One family from Mexico demonstrated how to make corn tortillas and a family from Nigeria brought in a display of traditional clothing, food, and musical instruments.

Outside of school, refugee families are linked with other families in the community who check in with them on a regular basis, with the help of the resettlement center. The goal is for them to stay connected for at least a year and to help more people in Harrisonburg become aware of refugee families and the challenges that they face.⁸⁹



Families from Stone Spring Elementary brought in traditional food to celebrate the school's multiculturalism at recent potluck event. Photo: Janie T. Carnock

PREPARING ALL TEACHERS TO WORK WITH DLLS

Teacher preparation and training also matter. According to a 2000 national survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, only 26 percent of teachers across all grade levels had received professional development related to working with DLLs and 27 percent reported feeling well prepared to work with these students.⁹⁰ In 2011, that number remained virtually unchanged, with 26.8 percent of teachers reporting that they had received professional development related to DLLs.⁹¹ While several states, including Minnesota, New York, Virginia, and Washington, have implemented policies mandating that pre-service teachers receive training in how to support DLLs, a 2014 report by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that 76 percent of teacher preparation programs did not adequately address strategies for teaching DLLs in their literacy coursework.⁹²

In Harrisonburg, all teachers are offered multiple professional development opportunities to grow their knowledge and skills related to working with DLL students. Since 2003, teachers in Harrisonburg have been required to take a four-day class on working with DLLs within their first three years of employment. The course, “Understanding, Supporting, and Reaching English Language Learners,” focuses heavily on new arrivals including refugees, recently arrived immigrants,

and unaccompanied minors. The course was developed by the district’s ESL program specialists and includes background on DLL supports and services in HCPS, key terminology, information about student acculturation, WIDA proficiency levels (used to classify and measure English proficiency; see box on page 25), and WIDA’s “CAN DO” descriptors (what DLLs can do at different stages of language development), information on SIOP (including lesson plans), and strategies for effective vocabulary instruction. For example, the coursebook suggests that teachers create consistent strategies for introducing and teaching essential vocabulary, such as providing explanations that relate to student experience, or using visuals to illustrate word meanings.⁹³

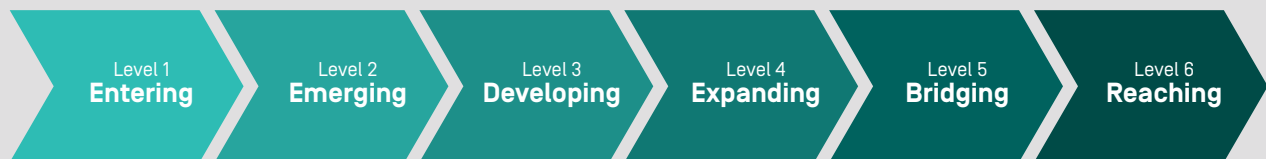
For the past 10 years, Harrisonburg has also offered a free course on SIOP to all educators in the district. The course is taught by an HCPS instructional coach, and runs from October to April. Participating teachers are observed by the course instructor and provided with feedback throughout the school year. Jeremy Weaver, HCPS Executive Director of Elementary Education and Title I, said the training allows teachers to develop a better understanding of how to support their DLL students and a common language to use when collaborating with ESL teachers⁹⁴ (see pages 21–23 for more on SIOP).

In the 2008 school year, HCPS began partnering with James Madison University to offer courses towards an ESL endorsement for interested teachers. Initially the district paid the entire cost of an ESL endorsement and was able to run a few cohorts through the program, including Principal Anne Lintner at Keister Elementary, who said, “we have a fair number of people, myself included, that have gone back to get an ESL endorsement simply because they want to have a better understanding

of how to meet the needs of students in the classroom—not because they’re looking to become an ESL teacher.”⁹⁵ Currently, the district does not have the funding to pay for all coursework necessary for an endorsement but does provide teachers with \$1,300 a year that they can use to pay for additional coursework. That amount is enough to cover the cost of one three-credit graduation level course at JMU.⁹⁶

WIDA ACCESS for ELLs

WIDA’s ACCESS for ELLs exam (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners) helps educators monitor ELLs’ progress in acquiring English. It assesses a student’s ability to speak, read, write, and listen in English across major content areas. Students are given a composite score, as well as scores in the individual domains.



Students in grades 1–12 are assigned a composite score that places them in an associated proficiency level ranging from 1 to 6, while kindergarten students are placed in levels ranging from 1 to 5. The levels indicate a student’s progression from knowing little to no English (levels 1 and 2), developing intermediate to high levels of English (levels 3, 4, and 5), to acquiring grade-level English and becoming English proficient (level 6). This final level indicates that students are ready to exit ELL status.

The WIDA CAN DO descriptors were developed in collaboration with educators and experts at the Center for Applied Linguistics. CAN DO descriptors are examples of what students “can do” at different stages of language development in the areas of speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Teachers may use these descriptors to differentiate instruction and guide instructional conversations and planning.

* This textbox was modified from: Amaya Garcia and Conor P. Williams, *Stories from the Nation’s Capital: Building Instructional Programs and Supports for Dual Language Learners from PreK–3rd Grade in Washington, DC* (Washington, DC: New America, 2015).

Recently, the district’s elementary schools have moved towards professional learning communities (PLC), a form of professional development that helps teachers collaborate and examine classroom strategies to use.⁹⁷ In Harrisonburg, teachers meet in PLCs by grade level or content area at least once per week to plan, develop common formative assessments, and discuss the needs of individual students, using data to drive conversations. At least once a month, teachers are able to use early release days (when students are dismissed at 1 p.m.) to meet. This also makes it possible for ESL teachers to attend. That is important, given the district’s shift towards an inclusive model of ESL instruction, where specialists are providing language services in the mainstream classroom. “The elementary schools are ahead of the game in terms of including opportunities for DLL teachers to be in the classroom co-teaching and communicating ideas in their planning sessions,” said Anne Loso, mathematics coordinator at HCPS.⁹⁸

Administrators and central office staff consistently identified professional development as one of the district’s strengths. Lintner noted that the PLC process has helped teachers better consider the needs of individual students and to reflect on whether classroom strategies are working to move students forward.⁹⁹ And as Jeremy Weaver notes, the district has also begun to break down barriers between language teachers and content teachers: “I feel like we really are supporting all of our teachers to become teachers of language no matter what they’re teaching. That’s a great forward change that I see taking place in the schools. We don’t see that separation of ‘you’re just teaching language over here and I’m going to teach content.’ It’s really all about bringing that together,” he told us.¹⁰⁰



The district's central office is located in downtown Harrisonburg. Photo: Amaya Garcia

DUAL IMMERSION PROGRAMS: PROMOTING BILINGUALISM AND BILITERACY

In addition to targeted newcomer classes and DLL teacher preparation, the district is making significant investments in dual immersion instruction. Despite the district's multilingualism, the district settled on Spanish-English dual immersion programs since the majority of DLLs come from Spanish-speaking homes. The first Spanish-English dual immersion program in Harrisonburg opened in the fall of 2010 at Smithland Elementary under the leadership of Principal Gary Painter. Since then, programs have also been started at Keister, Waterman, and Spotswood Elementary Schools.

Why Dual Immersion

Painter had been interested in starting a program since the early 2000s after discussions with George Mason University professors Virginia Thomas and Wayne Collier on the effectiveness of dual immersion for promoting DLL achievement.¹⁰¹ Thomas and Collier had been advising the district on how to support DLLs, and emphasized that dual immersion was the most effective educational intervention for language learners (see sidebar: *Instructional Models for Supporting DLLs* on page 8 for more information

on common instructional methods).¹⁰² For example, in one study in Houston, Thomas and Collier found that the district's two-way immersion programs helped close the achievement gaps between DLLs and non-DLLs.¹⁰³

More recently, researchers from Stanford University have examined the impact of dual language programs on DLL academic achievement over time. Rachel Valentino and Sean Reardon compared academic performance by type of instructional program (English only, transitional bilingual, developmental bilingual, and dual immersion) and found that students in dual immersion programs had significantly higher rates of performance on English language arts and math tests than those in English immersion by seventh grade.¹⁰⁴ Their study showed that the impact of dual immersion is not immediate—academic benefits are not apparent until early middle school—and lends support to the recommendation that programs offer at least six years of sustained instruction in the target language.¹⁰⁵

To that end, HCPS foreign language coordinator Jeremy Aldrich does not expect to see an increase in student achievement until this year, when the first cohort of students will enter sixth grade.¹⁰⁶

Many students who begin dual immersion in kindergarten leave ESL services by the end of fourth grade, which is not the case for students who do not participate in those programs, Aldrich said. That follows a pattern suggested by a 2015 study that found that Portland Public Schools' dual immersion students exited from language learner services at much faster rates than those not in the program.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, immersion students in Portland outperformed their non-immersion peers on the state standardized reading assessment by “seven months of learning in grade five, and nine months of learning in grade eight.”¹⁰⁸

As Principal Lintner explained, many parents find it hard to believe that continuing to learn in Spanish (or any other native language) can help their children learn English. But research confirms that bilingual education does not interfere with the acquisition of English.¹⁰⁹ Rather, the maintenance and continued development of their home language can actually help children learn English. Linguistic expert Jim Cummins' theory of common underlying proficiencies suggests that skills in a first language transfer to a second language: the strategies used to learn to read in Spanish are transferable to learning to read in English.¹¹⁰ There is evidence to back this claim. A 2007 study by Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Coleen Carlson, and Sharolyn Pollard-Durodola found that kindergartners' Spanish skills were predictive of their English skills.¹¹¹ Specifically, strong letter, name, and sound identification skills in Spanish benefitted children's skills in English. These findings are significant in the context of Harrisonburg, where some non-English speaking parents worry that participation in a dual immersion program will hinder their children's English language development. To that end, school leaders and staff make a concerted effort to communicate the benefits of dual immersion to all parents.

A Look Inside a Dual Immersion Classroom

“¿Qué vas a comer hoy?” (What are you going to eat today?) Camila Pandolfi asks her kindergarteners.

She is sitting at the front of the class and taking count of how many students are going to eat school lunch and what their lunch choices are. The SmartBoard displays a grid with different options. “¿Cuántas personas van a comer un sándwich de jamón?” (How many people are going to eat a ham sandwich?) she asks. “Siete” (seven), responds one of the students. Pandolfi hands the student the pen and says, “Escríbelo por favor.” (Write it, please). These children are students at Waterman Elementary, one of four elementary schools in Harrisonburg that offers a Spanish-English dual immersion program. The program at Waterman began in 2014 as part of the district's larger push to increase access to dual immersion programs and to better support their Spanish-speaking DLL students.

Pandolfi understands the value of dual immersion programs firsthand: she moved to Harrisonburg from Uruguay in middle school and spent several years classified as an English learner. In those years, the district did not offer any bilingual education opportunities and most teachers were monolingual English speakers. Pandolfi sees dual immersion as an especially powerful opportunity for her students who are newcomers to the U.S. She shared the story of a student from the Dominican Republic who arrived at school knowing only one or two words in English. While it might be easy—especially in an English-only instructional model—to think of this student in terms of what she *cannot do* in English, Pandolfi noted that during the Spanish portion of the day the girl “gets to shine and surprises her peers with all she knows and can contribute in Spanish.”¹¹²

Dual immersion has proved equally powerful for Spanish-speaking families, who appreciate being able to communicate with their child's classroom teacher without the help of an interpreter. “What a difference it makes. Parents open up more and tell you things they wouldn't say through an interpreter. They are so excited and glad to have a teacher they can call and write to at any moment,” said Pandolfi.¹¹³

Teachers are willing to push themselves to learn more, spend time observing one another, and work with an instructional coach who helps coordinate the weekly planning meetings and supports their pedagogical growth.

Program Design: A School- and District-Level View

Keister Elementary School: A Two-Year Development Process

Anne Lintner has worked in Harrisonburg public schools for over 20 years, beginning her career as a teacher, becoming assistant principal, and finally, principal of Keister Elementary. She has witnessed the district's demographic changes firsthand, and helped ensure that Keister's dual immersion program was designed with DLL needs in mind. That intentionality translated into a program development process that spanned two years.

The process began in 2010, just after the program at Smithland opened. The district asked Lintner about starting dual immersion at Keister the next year. She resisted, and said her school would not start a program until leadership was clear on how they 1) wanted it designed, 2) would get strong teachers in place, and 3) would secure support from the whole school community. Lintner felt strongly about the need to have effective teachers in place first and to bringing the school on board with the program. That was due to the fact that dual immersion is a “strand program,” which means that it is a stand-alone program within the school that is separate from the English-only mainstream classrooms. “We have a really strong commitment to our mission; we created it together. And anything we do, we want everybody to see it, be on board, and be part of that discussion so we remain a really strong community,” Lintner said.¹¹⁴

To get clear on Keister's future program, Lintner and her team conducted several observations at Smithland and travelled to observe programs in North Carolina and elsewhere in Virginia to get a better understanding of how they structured language and content allocation. Then, the team was given broad autonomy to design the program, assisted by HCPS central office staff. Keister's program, which started in 2012, built on the 50/50 design of Smithland's program while adding new elements.

Principal Lintner and her team placed a stronger emphasis on helping students develop strong literacy skills in Spanish. She said, “honestly, this program was first and foremost an ESL program. It was to support students who were learning to speak English and so we wanted to teach reading in their first language.”¹¹⁵ In Lintner's view, that choice was key. Kindergarten students are taught reading in Spanish; in first and second grades, reading is emphasized across both languages, with students practicing reading English in their content area instruction (e.g., science, social studies). Lintner describes the approach as placing strong emphasis on working with language, writing, and words, not exclusively on decoding phonics.

Some teachers use digital media tools to help support writing development in Spanish. Rose Jantzi uses SeeSaw—a digital portfolio that allows students to publish and share their written work—to provide her second graders with “authentic opportunities to grow and celebrate their writing.”¹¹⁶

Students are able to comment on the work of their peers through the app and also share their work with their parents. They are expected to stay in the target language (Spanish) while using SeeSaw and the app helps hold them accountable since they often record voiceovers of their story. We observed students using the app to read stories written by their peers and to comment on them.

As the program evolves, the dual immersion team at Keister has continued its commitment to ongoing reflection. For example, the team hopes to identify better ways to assess oral language development. According to Lintner, there is a scarcity of resources for assessing oral language skills, so the teachers have designed their own measures. The teachers realize that spoken language production is an important indicator of language development and so endeavor to create structures (and allocate time) for students to talk every day. Principal Lintner does not take that commitment from her school's teachers for granted. She credits teacher collaboration as the program's primary strength, saying, "we meet every week at 7:30 in the morning to either address current things we are working on, look at data, talk about learning, [or] talk about what language should we provide intervention in."¹¹⁷

Teachers are willing to push themselves to learn more, spend time observing one another, and work with an instructional coach who helps coordinate the weekly planning meetings and supports their pedagogical growth. One teacher who started at Keister as an ESL teacher, and who had never worked with elementary students before, went back to school to get a reading endorsement and an elementary endorsement in order to teach in the dual language program.

Designing a District-wide Model: Participatory Decision-Making

This fall, four of the five elementary schools in Harrisonburg will have a Spanish-English two-way immersion program that enrolls equal numbers of native English and native Spanish speakers. According to Superintendent Kizner, HCPS runs

more dual immersion programs, proportionally, than any other district in the state.¹¹⁸ The program continues at one of the district's middle schools, where 25–35 percent of the instructional day takes place in Spanish. This is part of a larger trend in the state, said Jeremy Aldrich, because districts are seeing the value of providing students with opportunities to continue their Spanish language education and to become fully biliterate adults.¹¹⁹

In Harrisonburg, program scale-up has been staggered, with a new program opening every two years. And, in Spring 2016, the district's dual language committee—comprised of teachers, administrators, and district staff—developed a model that will eventually be used in all of the district's dual immersion programs. The model is being rolled out slowly, with the 2016–17 school year serving as a transition year for schools to become familiar with the new approach.

Earlier, HCPS had set broad parameters for program design, including that 50 percent of core instructional time be in Spanish and that schools balance content instruction between the two languages such that there is an equal number of content areas in Spanish and in English. That meant each school had very different models. For example, Waterman Elementary balanced content by conducting half of the year's math, science, and social studies instruction in Spanish and the other half in English. At Keister Elementary, there was a big push on K–2 literacy in Spanish through use of a 90/10 model, where 90 percent of instruction takes place in Spanish and 10 percent takes place in English.

These differences made it challenging for schools to share resources and materials, which are often made by teachers due to the limited availability of curricular materials in Spanish. And as the number of programs grows in the district, there is an increased need to ensure all programs receive similar levels of support and resources. The district's intentional planning is aligned with work being done in states like Utah, Delaware, and New Mexico to create an instructional sequence for dual immersion programs.¹²⁰

Program alignment between schools will guarantee consistency for our students and ensure the development of balanced biliteracy between all the main content areas.

— Jeremy Aldrich, HCPS Foreign Language Coordinator

Aldrich, the district’s foreign language coordinator, led the process of creating a unified model. He began by including the discussion in the committee’s year-long agenda and “giving people plenty of time to mentally prepare for the idea that we were, in fact, going to create a district-wide plan.”¹²¹ In April, Aldrich brought together the Spanish and English partner teachers to present his rationale, share examples from other districts, and discuss hopes and concerns for having a unified program model.

To be sure, the move to a unified model created some consternation among teachers and administrators. Just as Lintner and her colleagues at Keister had appreciated the autonomy provided to them in designing their program, some teachers expressed concern that the model would be too rigid and limit autonomy. However, they also felt hopeful that it would lead to increased opportunities for efficient cross-grade level collaboration, more targeted professional development, and resource sharing.

Four proposals were developed to address these issues, discussed by the committee, and put to a final vote. The new model spans the K–12 grades, but only specifies which subjects will be taught in which language from grades K–8 (see **Table 1**). This is because high school course offerings will be based on staffing availability. For example, some high school offerings such as AP Spanish Language, AP Spanish Literature, and Economics and Personal Finance, are already taught by world languages staff. Courses in other departments (e.g., math,

science, social studies, fine arts, etc.), said Aldrich, will depend on who is available to teach them.¹²²

In the early elementary grades, the new model will integrate language arts on the English and Spanish side. That means K–2 students will receive core literacy instruction in Spanish, and gain exposure to English texts in their content area subjects (e.g., social studies and science). Additionally, although core math instruction will be in English, students will still have 25–30 minutes of daily calendar math, which “incorporates calendar numbers and many other spoken language and math skill routines as well.”¹²³ As students progress through school, science and social studies instruction will alternate each year between the languages and language arts will be taught in both English and in Spanish. Aldrich noted that some schools were previously flipping languages between those subjects by semester, which led to challenges with creating targeted professional development.¹²⁴ Additionally, some schools had taught math exclusively in English in grades K–4 and that left students feeling unprepared to take math in Spanish in fifth grade.

Principal Joy Blosser at Spotswood Elementary, which is starting a new dual immersion program this fall, believes that the district-wide model will facilitate greater collaboration between schools and teachers.¹²⁶ Aldrich agrees and believes that program alignment between schools will “guarantee consistency for our students” and ensure the development of “balanced biliteracy between all the main content areas.”¹²⁷

Table 1 | Harrisonburg City Public Schools K–12 Overall Dual Immersion Program Sequence

	K-2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9-12
ENG	Integrated Language Arts Math	Int. LA Calendar Math Science	Int. LA Math	Int. LA Calendar Math Science	Language Arts Math	Language Arts Social Studies Science	Language Arts Math	At least 2 [out of 8] courses in Spanish each year
SPAN	Integrated Language Arts Calendar Math	Int. LA Math Social Studies	Int. LA Science Virginia Studies	Int. LA Math Social Studies	Language Arts Social Studies Science	Language Arts Math	Language Arts Social Studies Science	
Bridging built in regularly between languages ¹²⁵								

Looking Ahead

At a March school board meeting, Kizner expressed his support for expanding access to dual immersion in Harrisonburg, but cautioned that finding qualified bilingual teachers remains a challenge.¹²⁸ Indeed, 34 states report shortages in bilingual and ESL educators and many school districts rely on teachers from abroad to help staff their dual immersion programs.¹²⁹ That is not an option in Harrisonburg, since the state of Virginia does not allow elementary schools to hire visiting international faculty. Additionally, the district is not currently able to take on the cost and responsibility of sponsoring foreign teachers.

Instead, the district relies on candidates from the teacher preparation programs at James Madison University and Eastern Mennonite University, which are both located in town. “Really our most effective recruitment is through practicum students and student teachers who get a chance to be in our dual programs,” said Jeremy Aldrich at the same meeting. “We’re very glad for our close relationships with JMU’s College of Education and with EMU, where most of the candidates come from. We’re

working more closely with them to make sure that we steer students, even before they have their practicum experiences, into an awareness of our dual programs.” That is an important message to share with local teacher preparation programs. One first grade dual immersion teacher said that her JMU advisor initially counseled against pursuing a degree in teaching Spanish at the elementary level, due to the misperception that there is a scarcity of jobs in the field.¹³⁰

Our most effective recruitment is through practicum students and student teachers who get a chance to be in our dual programs.

— *Jeremy Aldrich, HCPS Foreign Language Coordinator*

Since many of the teachers are non-native Spanish speakers, the district has created a formal process for assessing proficiency in writing and speaking. Aldrich admits that they do have teacher candidates

who arrive with slightly lower proficiency levels than he would like, but says that the district gives them the support they need to grow their skills.

For instance, HCPS recently received approval from the school board to start the Harrisonburg Teacher Residency program, in partnership with JMU, that will help prepare teachers to work in high-needs areas such as dual immersion, special education, and secondary level mathematics. Teacher residency programs are a model of teacher preparation that provide teacher candidates with a year of “on the job” training. According to the National Center for Teacher Residencies, these programs “provide residents with both the underlying theory of effective teaching and a year-long, in-school ‘residency’ in which they practice and hone their skills and knowledge alongside an effective teacher-mentor in a high-need classroom.”¹³¹

According to Ann Conners, Supervisor of Training and Teacher Development at HCPS, the district hopes to replicate a similar Richmond City Public

Schools program, which was designed to attract teachers to work and stay in high-need and high-poverty parts of that district.¹³² All of the coursework will be offered at JMU and participants will be enrolled in a master’s program at the university. Program candidates must commit to staying in HCPS for four years: in year one, they will work as full-time resident teachers under the guidance of a resident coach, and in years two through four, they will work as classroom teachers. The resident coaches will be HCPS teachers who are trained in a cognitive coaching model that includes observation tools that can be used to give feedback and strategies for holding “coaching conversations.”¹³³ Cognitive coaching focuses on helping teachers “improve instructional effectiveness by becoming more reflective about teaching” so they can “self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-evaluate” their own instructional practices.¹³⁴ HCPS plans to pilot the program in the 2016–17 school year with two or three residents in the area of secondary mathematics.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS

The population changes that have occurred in Harrisonburg over the past 15 years are not unique. As the demographics of the country change, small towns and school districts are seeing increases in their language learner populations. But this district's responses to these changes stand out. HCPS staff members commit to consider the needs of the individual child. There is a shared vision of DLL success and a recognition that diversity brings substantial assets to schools and to the community. The supports and services that the district has devised for DLL students and their families have been driven by need, but also by a willingness to continuously refine practices and make these students a priority. District leaders talk about their schools' changing demographics as assets and opportunities. "I would say from my experiences in other places where there weren't so many students—that critical mass you talk about—it's almost like it is more viewed as a side conversation rather than *the* conversation," said Jeremy Weaver, HCPS Executive Director of Elementary Education.¹³⁵

Besides critical mass, the district has several other advantages that have helped it become a state leader in DLL education. First, its schools are "well-resourced and supported by the city council and our school board," Aldrich said.¹³⁶ Second, this commitment of resources and support has given the district latitude to expand early education opportunities (including the construction of a new

early education center) and provide parents with key contact points to ensure access for DLLs. Third, the district has been able to leverage partnerships with local universities to identify teachers for its dual immersion programs and to provide teachers with continued training. Fourth, district leaders have worked closely with local organizations to help coordinate services for newly-arrived students and their families. Finally, the district's small size allows for a targeted approach to meet the needs of individual students and families.

Harrisonburg offers several lessons that other districts can draw on and learn from when designing instructional programs, supports and services for DLLs and their families.

Lesson #1: Invest to expand DLL access to early childhood education programs.

Since 2011, Harrisonburg City Public Schools has rapidly expanded its pre-K programs and deployed strategies to ensure DLLs have access to these programs. The expansion has been facilitated by state and district investments, community partnerships, and Superintendent Scott Kizner's leadership and belief that early education is a foundation for student success. HCPS will open a stand-alone early childhood center in 2017 to ensure access is maintained as school enrollment grows and capacity at elementary buildings becomes strained.

Lesson #2: Create welcome centers, hire liaisons, and build partnerships to increase family engagement in schools.

Harrisonburg uses multiple strategies to ensure that families are supported and engaged in the school community. Bilingual home-school liaisons provide language-minority families with essential communication about school routines, expectations, and norms; serve as interpreters during critical parent-teacher meetings; assist with home visits; design targeted programs for parents; and facilitate access to early childhood education and dual immersion programs. These staff members maintain strong relationships with local community organizations to help families receive necessary services. The HCPS Welcome Center provides language screenings and serves as a community hub for language-minority families who need to enroll children in the district's public schools.

Lesson #3: Differentiate programs to meet the diverse needs of DLLs.

Ten percent of dual language learners in Harrisonburg were new to the American school system in 2016. The city has been a refugee resettlement site since the 1970s and the district has offered specialized help for newcomers for the past decade, a pull-out program designed to help them with the language skills necessary to navigate school and integration into the community. These classes allow newcomers to work in small groups led by ESL teachers and provide them frequent opportunities to engage in discussions and develop their academic language skills. The district's dual immersion programs provide opportunities for Spanish-speaking DLLs to receive instruction in their home language and in English.

Lesson #4: Prepare all teachers to work effectively with DLLs.

Teachers in Harrisonburg are afforded multiple opportunities to increase their skills for working with DLLs. The district requires all PreK–12

educators to take a four-day introductory course on essential facets of supporting DLLs, including the process of language acquisition; strategies for building academic language; basics of modifications; and strategies and standards used to guide instruction. Teachers can also take a year-long course on SIOP and are provided with coaching and feedback on how to implement these methods in the classroom. Professional learning communities provide space for classroom teachers and ESL teachers to work together to address individual student needs.

Lesson #5: Explore strategies to increase collaboration among schools.

HCPS teachers, administrators, and central office staff collaborated to create a district-wide dual immersion model to increase opportunities for sharing resources, collaboration, and consistency across programs. This district-wide model seeks to eliminate problems that had emerged in previous years when schools were more autonomous, creating their own programs without much collaboration and with little sharing of resources. For example, some programs had placed a strong focus on teaching particular subjects only in Spanish in elementary school, which made the transition to a more English-dominant middle school more difficult. While there is a delicate balance to strike between school-level autonomy and district-wide coordination, a more cohesive model has the potential to ameliorate these types of challenges.

Lesson #6: Incorporate DLLs' needs at the outset of all policy formulation and reformulation.

DLLs represent more than a third of students in Harrisonburg. Their needs have been integrated into essential conversations and decisions up front rather than as an afterthought. The district has shifted towards seeing the instruction of dual language learners' as a shared responsibility and helping all teachers to become teachers of language.

Notes

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⁸ Scott Kizner, interview with authors, January 21, 2016.

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¹⁵ Sharon Shuttle, data shared in e-mail with Amaya Garcia, May 31, 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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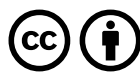
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